

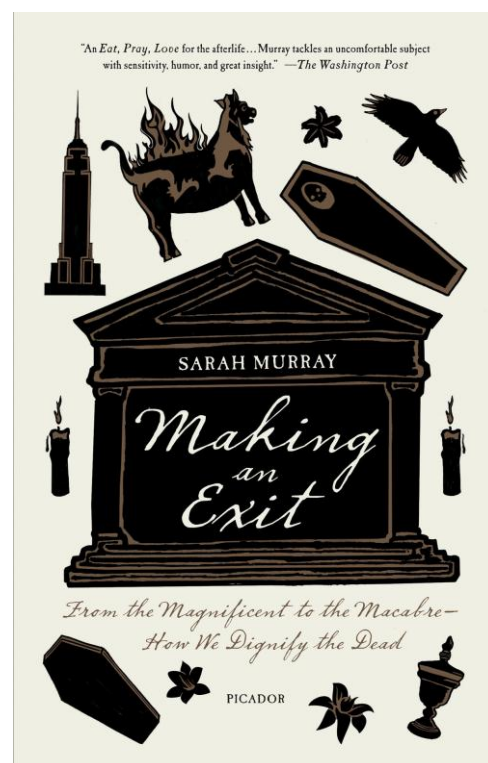
Reading Group Gold

Making an Exit by Sarah Murray

Author and journalist Sarah Murray never gave much thought to what might ultimately happen to her remains—that was until her father died. While he'd always insisted that the “organic matter” left after a person takes their last breath had no significance, he surprised his family by setting down elaborate arrangements for the scattering of his own ashes. This unexpected last request prompts Murray to embark on a series of voyages to discover how our end is commemorated around the globe—and how we approach our own mortality.

Spanning continents and centuries, *Making an Exit* is Murray's exploration of the extraordinary creativity unleashed when we seek to dignify the dead. Along the way, she encounters a cremation in Bali in which two royal personages are placed in giant decorative bulls and consigned to the afterlife in a burst of flames; a chandelier in the Czech Republic made entirely from human bones; a weeping ceremony in Iran; and a Philippine village where the casketed dead are left hanging in caves. She even goes to Ghana to commission her own fantasy coffin.

Part travel book, part memoir, *Making an Exit* “tackles an uncomfortable subject with sensitivity, humor and great insight” (Washington Post). But this is also a very personal quest: on her travels, Murray is seeking inspiration for her own eventual send-off.



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Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. In her introduction, the author recalls her father's attitude toward death and dying. Have you ever discussed the topic with friends or family, and if so, what are their various attitudes toward their own deaths? How did the conversation arise and was it a difficult one to broach?
2. The book examines the “way we dignify the dead” across different cultures. What do you think are the most striking differences between the ways the dead are honored and celebrated around the world? Which two practices do you think provide the biggest contrast?
3. From dancing and feasting to public weeping and wailing, death rites around the world may look very different, but there are also several common threads to these ceremonies and practices. What do you see as the strongest elements linking them all?
4. How do you think that traditional death rites help the bereaved work through their grief? In today's society, where many of these traditions have been lost, which kinds of rituals could we revive or recreate to help people deal with loss?

5. In Chapter 3, “Packing for Eternity,” the author describes Terror Management Theory, which posits that humans’ foreknowledge of their own death has provided the seeds from which the whole of civilization has sprouted, shaping much of what we do, what we believe in, and the way we behave. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this theory?
6. In your opinion, what are the biggest changes taking place in the way we mark death? Which of these changes do you see as most positive?
7. Aside from questions of funerals, memorials and other ceremonies, death brings with it the question of how to dispose of the body. Throughout the book, the author examines several options, from burial to cremation to mummification and a new eco-burial called alkaline hydrolysis, in which an alkaline solution is used to accelerate the natural decomposition of a body. Which option would you choose?
8. In Chapter 7, “Foreign Fields” the author explains that in many societies, the desire to be buried at home is the strongest one. Today, in an increasingly global world, where people may have lived in many places during their lifetimes, on what basis can they make decisions about where to bury or scatter their remains? Where would you like your remains to be buried?
9. The book explores the feelings that we humans (the author included) have toward their own deaths. The author finds thinking about death frightening, but it also helps her value life more. Today, do we spend enough time thinking about death? How might doing so change the way in which we approach life’s successes, failures and human relationships?
10. In the final chapter, the author describes what she would like to have happen to her remains. What she chooses not only satisfies her desire to have her remains left in well-loved places but, more importantly, helps her create a legacy. In the light of your inevitable mortality, what would you like your legacy to be?

About the Author

British-born author **Sarah Murray** is a long-time contributor at the *Financial Times* and author of *Moveable Feasts: The Incredible Journeys of the Things We Eat* (Aurum Press, 2007, St Martin’s Press, 2007, Picador, 2008). She has lived and worked in Hong Kong, Vietnam and South Africa. She now lives in New York City.



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